

Dramatics

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This month's front cover shows a scene from Paul D. Schreiber, New York, High School's production of *Oh What a Lovely War* (see article page 14); photo by Henry Groskinsky. Illustrations for *Chowder and Cherries* by Tom Greene of Triad Art, Cincinnati, Ohio. Adaptations of children's letters, pages 17 and 19, by Tom Greene. Photos pages 14 through 16 by Henry Groskinsky. Photos pages 17 through 19 by Public Relations Office of the Frederick County Board of Education in Maryland. On Stage photos pages 20 and 21: *Oliver!* by Mayhew Photographers; *Aesop's Fables* by Jim Bertino; *The Boy Friend* by Bill Coffman; *Little Mary Sunshine* by Jim Moscone; *Where's Charley?* by Mike Henley. Photos page 24 and 26 by Bill Brightmire. Page 28 photographer Glenn Compton. Page 32 photo by Steve Ueckert.

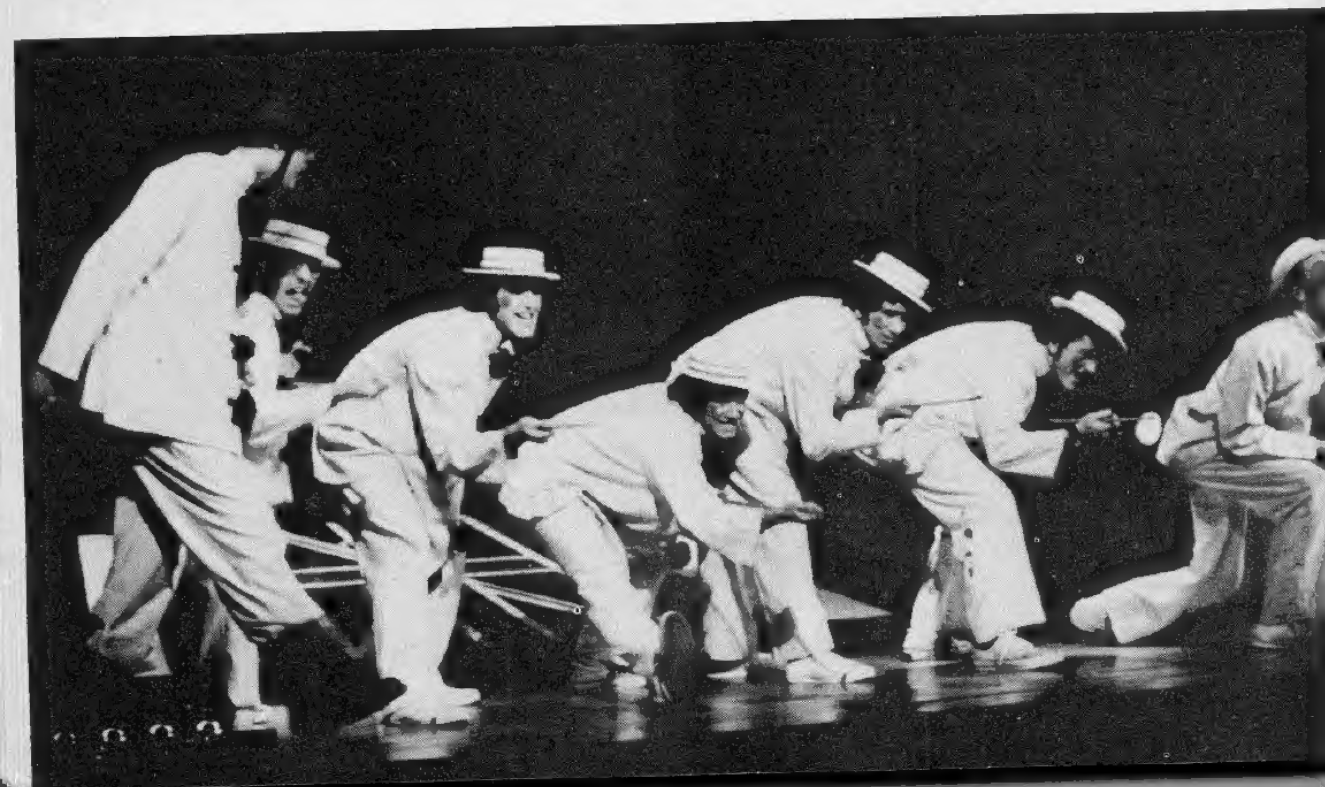


STAGING A MULTI-FACETED MUSICAL

"Oh What a Lovely War"

By Don E. Jones, Jr.
Photos, Henry Groskinsky

ABOVE: Slides projected in the background formed an integral part of Paul D. Schreiber High School's production of *Oh What a Lovely War*.
BELOW: The Pierrot soldiers form a chorus line, aiming canes rather than guns, in this New York high school production, directed by Don E. Jones, Jr. All photos by Henry Groskinsky.



The usual program for our suburban, Long Island high school consists of a fall musical followed by a winter and spring production. This year my associate in the music department is on sabbatical, and I was somewhat reluctant to attempt the usual fall musical with his replacement who was new to teaching. However, I had always wanted to do *Oh What a Lovely War*, and it seemed my chance had finally appeared. It was a play with music and not difficult music which the young teacher could deal with, and we would still have a fall musical with all of its appeal to large casts and audiences.

Oh What a Lovely War was developed by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and Charles Cilton ten years ago in London. Making use of improvisational techniques and considerable research, the group created a musical revue which devastatingly portrayed the insanity of World War I. Much of the work was based on English Music Hall traditions and on soldier's parodies of the period's popular songs. The result is a condensed, kaleidoscopic history of the war years which is both satirical and powerfully humane.

Oh What a Lovely War is not handled by a large American company and my first hurdle was just getting in touch with Joan Littlewood's American representative. Letters sent to England finally brought back a Maryland address. I called, arranged dates and discussed fees. We were on our way.

There was little enthusiasm for a show few students had heard of, but I had a significant number of students appear for the auditions. Casting *Oh What a Lovely War* is an interesting problem. Littlewood's actors, costumed as Pierrots, and actresses dressed as show girls, played a bewildering number of characters who either suffer the misfortunes of war with a grim smile, patriotically con their boys into going off to the front, or foolishly misuse the power behind the conflict. Everyone plays many roles, but the script allows you to make those decisions for yourself.

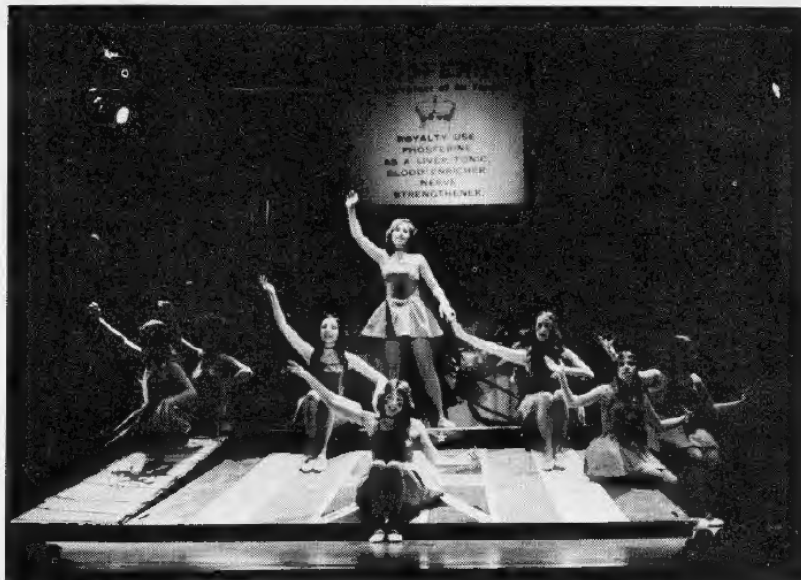
I decided our production would be an ensemble effort with no one person taking the major roles. Although the show is predominantly male, it does have eight musical numbers which feature a girl and one scene which features an actress. I found nine girls who could handle the solo work and still work together as an ensemble. I spread the male parts out in the same fashion, making certain that the solo work was shared and that each boy had at least one scene which could be called "his" and a number of scenes where he worked in a supporting role. The logistics involved in that planning were most important so that an actor

would not play in one scene only to reappear in the next as someone else.

Not only do actors play several different roles, but in these roles they assume several different nationalities; and thus the language of the play was our first major problem. We needed to have several different accents. Much of the humor of the play, in fact, is due to the attempts of the English to master other languages of those they are confronting. Thus, the English trying to fluently speak French and German reveal their inadequacy in mastering these languages by speaking an Anglicized, gibberish-like adaptation. The

other nationalities face the same problems, but with more success, in trying to communicate. Our language department agreed to work with the actors who had to face these problems and even recorded the speeches so that the actors could study the material when they had free time.

The set was built by my English elective play production class and consisted mainly of a ramp and platform unit painted with the French and English flags, with the German flag on either side. This unit was surrounded by painter's scaffolds which we borrowed from the custodians.



The showgirls offer bon-bons and nerve tonic called Phosferine to the boys on the way to the front.

JOAN LITTLEWOODS THEATRE WORKSHOP

Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop, the originators of *Oh What a Lovely War*, have just celebrated their twentieth anniversary of producing plays at London's Theatre Royal. Throughout her career, Littlewood has been especially interested in a distinctive kind of social theatre that seeks to speak as directly and as entertainingly to the experience of her audience as possible. Her belief that theatre is in and of the world, not necessarily in theatre buildings, has led the company to construct playgrounds in areas demolished by urban renewal which surround their ninety-three year old theatre home. As an extension of their community work, a "Fun Palace" has been planned, with consultation from such architects as Buckminster Fuller, which would incorporate environmental, educational and entertaining experiences for anyone who wanted to drop in.

The Theatre Workshop itself was perhaps the first modern ensemble acting company in Britain. Improvisational techniques, group works, the creativity of the actors, wit and satire have been hallmarks of their art since the group's organization. After touring *Oh What a Lovely War* on Broadway in 1964, Littlewood and producer Gerry Raffles worked for two years at the International Cultural Center in Tunisia. Eventually they returned to the Theatre Royal, and the Theatre Workshop has been active since its re-opening in 1967.

Recent shows done at Theatre Workshop include: *The Marie Lloyd Story*; a revival of Brendan Behan's *The Hothouse* which was premiered by the company in 1958; *Big Rock Candy Mountain*; and the current offering, the musical *Is Your Doctor Really Necessary?*, a satirical look at the medical profession. □

The script calls for slides to be shown as an integral part of the production, and they are available from the North American Agent for *Oh What a Lovely War* for a small additional fee. The slides include World War I volunteer posters, ads for popular patent medicines to be used in the trenches, battle maps and many photos of the war itself. The contrast between the often comic stage action and the grim realities of the gas attacks, the scores of wounded and the fields of graves shown in the photos is particularly powerful. Rear projection is the only sensible way of dealing with the slides. We are close enough in New York City and our contacts were such that we were able to borrow a rear projection screen. I suppose you could make one if necessary.

The script also calls for a moving, electric "Time's Square" type sign upon which headlines are flashed. We used two newsboys who viewed the action from the scaffold and interrupted with their news. This device gave the production an interesting quality of being watched as it was relived.

We didn't realize the size of the task facing us until we really began to deal

with the script. Most of my students hadn't even heard of Armistice Day and knew little or nothing about the American involvement in World War I so the English side of it was really unknown. Like the cast which developed the play, we set about our own research and found much information to help us get into the numerous brief scenes which have specific historical references. Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* was read, old history books with pictures appeared, and soon we all knew enough about Sir John French and his feud with Sir Douglas Haig over control of English strategy to make their scenes meaningful. The search for the answers to our questions was exciting to all of us. The cast did it with joy.

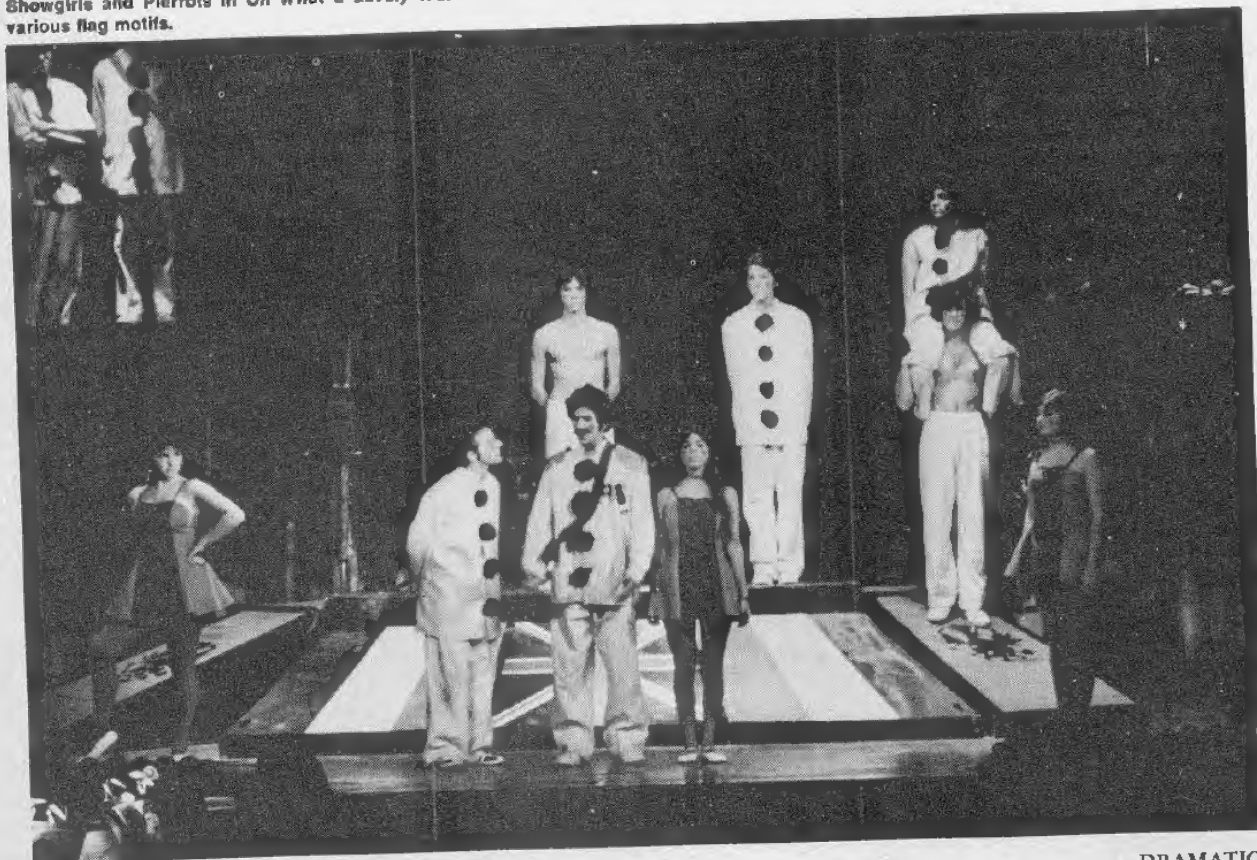
I wish I could tell you that our audiences were as large as they had ever been, but that isn't true. We did well. Many, many people returned to see the production all four times it was presented. Letters were sent to the school and local papers praised the effort. Audiences were deeply moved. During one intermission I was introduced to an elderly English lady who had just arrived for her first visit to this country to see her daughter.

She grabbed my hand and told me that she was amazed that a group of American high school students could so capture the English spirit of the war. Her daughter confirmed that she had hummed her way through the entire first act as she recognized each old song.

In case I have gotten you interested in producing *Oh What a Lovely War*, Joan Littlewood's North American Agent's address is: Carole Christensen Love, Long Point on the Severn, Crownsville, Maryland 21032. □

DON E. JONES, JR., director of drama in the Department of Performing Arts at Paul D. Schreiber High School, Port Washington, Long Island, New York, prepared at Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin, Yale University School of Drama and New York University. A founding member of The Attic Theatre, Mr. Jones served as Managing Director of this Appleton, Wisconsin theatre for ten years. He has also taught for fifteen years at Trinity School in Manhattan. Photographer: **HENRY GROSKINSKY**, formerly with *Life* magazine.

Showgirls and Pierrots in *Oh What a Lovely War* watch action from scaffolding and march across the raked platforms which incorporate various flag motifs.



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